

Second Nature¹

Murray Bookchin, 1996

[Part 1 recording begins]

I tried last week to create some sense, first of all, of what social ecology was and what its premises were. And when it came down to working out or heading toward developing what you would call an ethics, I went through a great deal of natural evolution as you'll remember, and tried to show what meaning there was in the organic evolutionary process.

What I would like to do today is continue that to some extent (and perhaps go into other issues as well given time) and examine the social process that emerges out of this biological process. Both the continuities and discontinuities that exist between what can be called natural evolution and social evolution. And what meaning can be given to social evolution.

The meaning that I try to give to natural evolution is that one can see any kind of development that lends itself to rational interpretation in the evolution of organisms.

From our lowly amoeba all the way up to our sublime primates, this was the development of self-consciousness of mind. That is to say, going from the most elementary forms of sensibility, identity, as you might find in an amoeba, all the way through to self-consciousness, intellection² (you recall my steps), and finally reason.

And only human beings—and I say they are unique in this respect—are capable of reasoning on a level of generality that makes them creative to an unlimited extent. Where most animals adapt, and that is their primary function from an evolutionary standpoint, of various mutations, changes, elaborations, in the evolutionary tree, as it was—as it flourishes and flowers out clear through from the Paleozoic all the way up to the Cenozoic.

That we have seen an ever greater development of consciousness, intellection and the rudiments of mind, and by mind I mean reason in a human sense. That is the say, the ability to flexibly create one's environment. And that human beings are constituted by natural evolution itself to intervene in the environment. Not simply to adapt to it. Not simply to find a niche in the environment or secure way of living. But also to change it.

That's what is unique about human beings: using their rationality, such that the environment is suitable for them; not leaving it up to evolution to make them suitable to changes in the environment.

Now that's an enormous qualitative step. It's a qualitative difference.

It does not mean that the world was made for us. It wasn't made for anyone. In fact it wasn't made. It evolved, cosmically speaking, over billions of years.

It doesn't mean that we can or should be cruel to animals. It doesn't mean that we should "dominate" them in any sense over and beyond what our simple needs are (and you can argue about the wisdom of eating meat or not, and so on).

1 Transcriber's note: The two source recordings of this lecture can be found at the following URLs, Part 1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_6WsYBMow4, and Part 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbHcupHZRM0>. Both were published on 1st October 2018 by the Institute for Social Ecology.

2 Transcriber's note: for the record he actually says "intellectuation" but this is highly likely a mispronunciation of "intellection", so I have amended this.

Our animals' power are very important together with human labour power for thousands and thousands of years in cultivating this planet. And making it possible for us to sit and talk about what should be done with this planet. Or how we fit into it. So that human beings, if one were to ask, what their place is in the natural world, recognising that by the "natural world" we're talking about evolution.

Nature as we understand it, as we are talking about it, *is* evolution. Otherwise the word "nature" dissolves into being anything. Anything that contains molecules, and that is anything as such—atoms, electrons, protons, neutrons, etc—that would be nature.

If one goes beyond that notion of nature as being more than just that which exists, we are talking about the biosphere. And when we talk about the biosphere we are talking about its evolution. Otherwise the word "nature" becomes so big, so promiscuous as it were, so "universal" as to become almost vacuous. It becomes the being that is nothing.

So we are talking, when we speak of a natural world, or when we speak of the biosphere, we're talking about evolution. And it is always evolving.

The image of a beautiful scene as we stand on a mountain top (or look at a sight set aside for visitors and tourists of a national park, and the like), that scene is deceptive. Nature is never frozen in that sense. It is always evolving and even when we look at it. And it seems to be static. There are changes going on that may not be perceivable to us at that given moment. But over a period of time it would indicate changes that are very far reaching—soil...mountains are being eroded, valleys are being formed, rivers are changing, lifeforms are undergoing change, particularly on a microbial level and so forth... This is going on every second. So the frozen image that the picture postcard gives us, [which] one expands [on] with great passion, and speaks of all the beauties of nature, are forever changing; are forever evolving. And the point that I've tried to demonstrate, or at least argue last week was that this change has been taught forever greater consciousness, sensibility, intellection, and finally rationality, which we, at long last, are potentially capable of exercising to an extent that no other life-form can even match, however intelligent many life-forms may be. And that expresses itself in our creativity, not simply in our adaptability, which is what marks most life-forms (they [merely] adapt to their environment).

Since we've been organised by natural evolution to intervene, as I told you this is not a sinister plot by social ecologists to create people who meddle in the natural world all the time, this is the product of millions and millions of years of evolution involving changing simple rock forms into weapons, or into cutting tools, or whatever you like.

We have also evolved in a way that has opened a new area of evolution: a second nature.

This new area of evolution is socio-cultural.

What we have done is create, out of whatever tendencies certain animals have to group together to form some kind of community, the most basic [...] or nuclear is, frankly, the mother-child relationship.

What has happened is we have elaborated whatever apparatus we have genetically or otherwise. A new realm of development that is not strictly biological and in fact is whose essence is to become less and less biological (which does not mean we can ever escape from our biology).

This is the realm of social relations, and very specifically (and this is what makes human communities different from any other animal community), we established *institutions*.

That is to say, we don't simply have animals grouping together. And we can get into a whole discussion on who going to be dominant and who's going to be submissive in various kinds of animal groups. And remember, possibly 50% of all the animals we talk about do not form groups at all. Most cats are not social. Leopards are not social. They are solitary animals. Lions form prides, but they are almost rare by comparison with all the other felines that exist in the wild. And even your domestic house-cat is basically not a social animal. That doesn't mean that these animals don't try to communicate with each other, in a sense, for sexual reasons. It doesn't mean that they might interact with each other because of territorial reasons. All of these things are true.

But they do not form even the most elementary types of communities when we speak of the kind that we speak of when we refer, say, to the behaviour of deer; when we talk of herds of bison. They don't do that at all.

So you would have to write off even certain primates like the orangutan, which is a solitary ape, and is a genuine ape, and is part of our hominoid lineage. Our lineage of human-like primates; diverging from us, I don't know how many million years ago, but still part of that lineage.

So the remarkable thing about human beings is not simply that they form herds, like zebras or bison... It's not simply that they form even communities like apes, that seem to have a measure of stability or although that measure is *very fragile*. But what human beings do is that they go beyond the formation of groups into the formation of institutions. Now this is remarkable.

An institution is a distinct way of organizing your interaction with other members of your species or, more specifically, other members of your group. And not only is that a distinct way of doing so, almost—to use the word in the most expanded fashion—a kind of social-contract, it is also a way of interacting in a *mutable* way. You can change institutions.

We all know that families have a history. That they have been, according to some theorists, group families, extended families, matriarchal or, more precisely, matricentric families, patricentric families, patriarchal families, nuclear families. And here we're talking about the most basic level of the bio-social relationships that people establish; involving how children are raised, involving how the two sexes interact with each other, what their rights and duties are...all of these have been modified over thousands of years. There's an institution that we call marriage which is extremely variable. This becomes far more flexible as we start getting into ways of administering societies.

We have *bands* at the most elementary level, where perhaps ten or less people seem to form a kind of community and extended family, as it were, of administering society. And they are based on kinship. What makes you a member of a band is the fact that you are related to a common ancestor. Whether that relationship is real or fictitious is not the point. The point is that there is a *belief* that you are related to a common ancestor. And very frequently, and certainly at one point or another, early on in the prehistory of humanity that common ancestry was very real. It was not fictitious.

Then after ward we have tribes. And we form clans in these tribes. And there too the kinship relationship is very pronounced: the blood tie. And people who do not have a shared blood tie with us, be it fictitious or be it real, are regarded as outsiders. They're inorganic, as Marx put it. They may become participants in the community, they may even be brought in as members through various rituals, including such childish rituals (or at least what today we regard as childish rituals) namely, mixing blood by pricking your skin. So you had tribal organisations. And these tribal organisations are merging out of band organisations were themselves very mutable—they began to

form tribal federations. The tribal federations in turn become increasingly more and more like *nations*. And they began to have increasingly national institutions. And these might include monarchs early on emerging out of chieftains. Or you had cities which had citizenship and admitted people according to certain oaths, or according to systems of rights and duties. So these institutions are very mutable and ultimately some of them graduated from autocracies, into oligarchies, and finally into various democracies and republics.

I can go on and on with every institution you can possibly think of. So now we are talking of the following. We're talking of ways in which human beings interact such that no animal does, namely by forming institutions, which no animal does. Even if you believe that everywhere in the animal world you have relations of dominance and submission, you're only talking about individual dominant animals, or individual submissive animals. But you're not talking about institutions.

The relationship changes according to whether or not the animals lives or dies, be it dominant or submissive. With institutions, on the other hand, you have something that has been preserved irrespective of whether or not a king, or a president, or a commissar...lives or dies. That doesn't change.

So what is remarkable about human social evolution is that you see an evolution of institutions.

And the community that human beings establish differs profoundly. This new *second nature*, which now undergoes an *evolution* of its own (or a *development* of its own, or a *history* of its own, use whatever words you want) undergoes a development of its own. An elaboration of its own on grounds that are fundamentally different to the kind you see in the natural world.

The real question that one faces is this: if this animal called a "human being"—normal human being—is potentially capable of being rational, potentially capable of being creative, potentially capable of changing his or her environments such that no other animal [or] creature can do, then will that animal, or can that animal, or should that animal, create institutions that are themselves rational as well?

In other words, should this second nature, this evolution live up to the basic capacity that make us human beings unique—namely, the capacity to be rational and self-conscious?

Now that doesn't mean, when I speak of capacity and potentiality that they are at any given time rational or self-conscious. They may be totally irrational. They may be totally blind to their own awareness or abilities.

And we recognise that ordinary discourse. We often say "Oh this woman, or this man, this child, male or female, has not lived up to their capacity—what a waste...!". In ordinary discourse we are always mindful of the potentialities of the individual to fulfil himself or herself.

[...]

And the compelling obligation in a sense of the whole human experiment or experience on this planet is: will human beings as potentially rational beings fulfil themselves in a rational society?

And that compels us to ask, what the heck do we mean by "rational society"?

What is a rational society?

This is a very unpopular question because now we're not supposed to believe in reason—we're supposed to believe in intuition. It's unpopular because it asks a very demanding question: by what standards are you going to judge what is rational? Is a democracy rational? Is capitalism rational? Is egotism rational? By what standards are you going to judge this?

And here we must go back again and examine something not only about the evolution of amoebas but the evolution of human beings.

[Part 1 recording ends]

[Part 2 recording begins]

Now the earliest evidence we have of institutions, organised institutions, go back to at least band and tribal societies. There we find everything is on a bio-social level.

Note well: that I have not said “sociobiology”, because sociobiology in fact freezes human beings according to their genetic apparatus; you're stuck with your genes and that's that. Those are the ultimate implications of a sociobiology or what is called an “evolutionary psychology” today... I do not accept that point of view. I do not regard that as being a valid interpretation of human development, or a means of interpreting human development, because the most striking feature of human development is precisely the fact that human beings develop beyond their genetic apparatus. That is to say, acquire cultural attributes not just genetic attributes, not just biochemical attributes, that determine their behaviour, or that profoundly affect their behaviour.

So going back now to early human development would be to find out, when we investigated, certain potentialities that are very remarkable from a social point of view. From a non-genetic point of view.

What we find first of all, human beings at the band level and frequently at the tribal level can live communally. They can learn to share. Not simply to care. Chimpanzee mothers can care for their infants. Human mothers and fathers (hopefully) care for their children. But they can share.

The most important advantage that seems to confer this freedom of using arms—of having four legs that now turned into arms—is the ability to carry. The ability to carry implied that this kind of animal, our ancestor, could bring food back to a community. And is more suggestive of the fact that such an animal was capable of sharing and even went out and pursued with the purposes of sharing than anything else. So that community began to form around the idea of sharing. Around the need for giving, and the reciprocity of giving and sharing, which seems to lie at the very heart of the development of our species even anatomically not only in other respects culturally.

The next great move we begin to see is the ability to fashion—fashion cutting instruments.

And fashion weapons for the purposes of hunting. And for all I know, and there's no evidence to show otherwise, hunting strangers, other human being, or other hominids. But more importantly the ability now to intervene in the environment and literally hunt down food with instruments that are not part of your anatomical equipment. Lions can do these things. Tigers can do these things very effectively [...] But their capacity to kill. Their capacity to acquire food is part of their anatomical equipment. We now find an animal can do what leopards, lions, tigers and whatever you wish, but using instruments. Spears, arrows, and so forth, in order to hunt other game.

Again we see a development beyond the anatomy, the inherited equipment more broadly, of such forms of life. And with that we see new relationships established between this form of life called “homo erectus” or “neanderthal” people, who certainly had spears—we know that now.

[...]

And so we now begin to see evidence of a hominid, or more precisely a human being, homo sapiens, that can now act upon the environment through tools. Now there’s something that is more remarkable than we can sense about this phenomenon. The tool is an extension of human powers. And more precisely an enlargement of human powers. First of all it has to be conceived of. That requires insight to an extent than no [other] animal really has (although chimpanzees can “make” tools out of simple twigs, but that’s hardly a great phenomenon when you consider sea otters who can use rocks to break open oysters).

What is remarkable about these tools is first of all that they are clearly fashioned with a distinct intention. They are fashioned for versatile purposes. They are more multitude of purposes—protection, hunting down game, and so forth. Tragically, I was going to say warfare.

But the point about this is that an alienation has taken place: a separation from the natural world indispensable for enlarging the creativity of this human creature, this animal. Yet it is an alienation that is still part of a natural environment.

Another great advance besides tools is the discovery of fire, and the uses of fire. And human beings have been using fire for at least a million years. Many great plains that exist today, [...] that provided sustenance for immense herds of animals, were artificially created by human beings who set fire to the grass and destroyed saplings and the encroachment of the forests on these lands. And indeed most of the plains that existed east of the Mississippi river on the continental United States were created by paleo-Indians or Indians generally before Europeans settled the coast.

And probably vast areas of what we call plains were not natural in any sense. They were created by human beings early in prehistory, who deliberately tried to provide an environment for herd animals on which they subsisted, at least in part. So that human beings were changing, long before what we call civilization, the emergence of civilization, they were changing this environment dramatically using tools and using fire. And that story goes up until relatively modern times when it is now known that statuesque, giant, virgin or original forests of the Northwest that are so widely admired today. The great ancient forests were kept as such by Indians, native Americans, who set fire to the grasslands around there, destroyed the shrubs, for two purposes: one, to make it difficult for animals to conceal themselves in the shrubs; and secondly, to prevent enemies from using it as camouflage against the community. So that these ancient forests are ancient primarily by virtue of human activity. Many of them would not be able to grow to the size that they did; acquired the almost temple-like beauty that they had, which we’re all familiar with from photographs, were it not for human actions.

At the same time we begin to see not only a sharing community beginning to emerge with institutions, but the emergence increasingly of institutions that tend toward *hierarchy*.

Part of this is even protected notably the emergence of gerontocracies: rule of elders over the young. Because the elders are frail, as I only know too well. They require assistance, as I know only too well. And whatever wisdom they have to offer, and that is becoming more and more diminished these days...in a preliterate culture that has no language is the product of a long experience inscribed on their brain. There are no volumes to open. There are no encyclopaedias. There are no schools.

You have to go to the elder to find out what is the best way not only to engage in certain ceremonies, not only to untangle areas of bloodlines, so that marriages can be arranged properly. But also, simple practical details of how to hunt, how to form camps, how to read the weather, and so on. [With] this instruction the elders become the encyclopaedias of the community and increasingly they have the potential, and later they begin to realise that potential, of having greater control. All the more because they are increasingly dependent as they grow older. They are dependent upon the younger to provide means of food, to provide the means of life, to protect the community. So we begin to see these early, almost natural, forms of domination organised around age groups.

At the same time we also begin to see the emergence of different *gender cultures*: female and male. In fact these are very early. These distinctions emerged very early on in the development of humanity.

And lastly, and significantly, we begin to see that the most able hunters are also the most able *warriors*.

And the more neurotic elements among the community become the *shamans*, who seem to be gifted with the powers of enquiring spirits in a spirit world, where everything has to be accounted for by virtue of the action of spirits, be it disease, be it good fortune in hunting, be it a simple accident... all to be blamed on spirits. The world is completely infested by spirits. And the shamans are there to collect that superstition, and utilize and manipulate it. For their own ends, no matter how much the New Age today may love shamans, be inspired by them...the fact of the matter is they are among the first politicians to appear among early tribal communities.

What we begin to see within the community itself is a gradual stratification. First around bio-social features: kinship, gender, age. And then, further, entirely unique, political (namely shamans who cultivate suspicions and fears of spirits), and lastly we begin to see warrior castes beginning to emerge (the most able of the hunters). And with increases in population the beginning of serious conflicts between tribal communities.

Thus we begin to see a transformation increasingly, not only toward a hierarchy and hierarchical institutions, but we also begin to see a transition into specifically social institutions. The shaman is not explicable in biological terms. Kinship is explicable in biological terms. Gender differences are explicable in biological terms. Age groups are explicable in biological terms. The shamans are not. And warriors are not. And with them chieftains are not. And the formation of tribal confederacies based around chieftains that become kings, like Odysseus, like Agamemnon, and so on... are not.

We also begin to see something that is remarkable and that is the emergence of cities. Many of them structured around religious goals. The temple being the most important. And sometimes the temple and palace being the most important buildings in any city (anyone's who's studied Maya culture will know this).

But now political authorities begin to emerge. And the state. And now a new evolution begins to take place.

And the most important problematic that this new evolution begins to raise is, first of all: to what extent can the egalitarian, sharing, practices of tribal life be preserved and transformed so that they fit into urban life?

To what extent can hierarchies be controlled such that people can live in a more participatory type of political society?

To what extent can be shared, those bio-social features like kinship, gender differences (I don't mean make them disappear obviously) but shared their hierarchical implications as hierarchy begins to develop?

How can this be done?

And this becomes one of the searing problems of what can best be called human history. It becomes in the last analysis what has been called in the 19th Century "the social question". That social burden that we begin to develop at the same time that we move away from a largely nature-based form of life with nature-based institutions, into specifically cultural and political structures...institutions, such as the patriarchal family, such as chieftains, such as urban life and all its demands politically as well as logistically, such as the problems of agriculture, ownership, and so on... All these issues now begin to emerge and also the issue of class rule—those who control or own property, and those who are placed in an oppressive and exploitative relationship to the owners of property. These issues now begin to emerge and begin to pose the question of how a rational society can come out of this soup that has been produced by the development away from first nature into second nature.

Am I clear here?

[Part 2 recording ends]